Keynote Presentation – Theme 4

Title: Meeting the education and training needs of a professional youth and community work workforce in challenging times: Austerity Britain and the fight to survive

Topic: Challenges in training and research on youth (theme 4)

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Abstract:

As we face the challenges of enforced austerity, and their cumulative effects on the most disadvantaged in society, the profession of youth and community work has never been needed more, and yet it faces an uncertain future in both the academe and publicly-funded social services. Drawing on the recent history of professional education and training for youth and community workers in England, and the validation processes that have developed to support this, the paper will offer a view on the current challenges faced by educators, practitioners and students who are looking to protect this area of professional practice and ensure it continues to be supported and valued.

We will look at the lessons that can be drawn from the validation and endorsement processes for youth and community work education and training in England, and the more recent development of the Joint Education and Training Standards committee for England, Scotland, Wales and the island of Ireland. The paper will highlight the competing and contradictory messages that make for uncertainty and confusion, whilst also celebrating the opportunities that are emerging. It will explain the key agencies, policies and organisations which are shaping the current debates, and assert the need for an educated and research-informed set of professionals to work in this new and challenging environment.

Using examples from youth and community work provision offered by Leeds Beckett University (both under and post-graduate) , alongside the competing expectations placed on academics, practitioners and students, the paper will seek to highlight particular curriculum developments currently underway which present interesting and exciting opportunities for those who educate and train future youth and community workers and associated social welfare professionals.

Finally, in taking a more outward-looking view, the paper will discuss new and emerging areas of practice and pan-European collaborations which reflect an increasing desire to draw on a rich and diverse set of traditions that can shape the future education and training of locally active, globally connected youth and community workers who are committed to working with young people, communities and the voiceless in society.

Meeting the education and training needs of a professional youth and community work workforce in challenging times: Austerity Britain and the fight to survive

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Introduction

As we face the challenges of enforced austerity, and their cumulative effects on the most disadvantaged in society, the profession of youth and community work has never been needed more, and yet it faces an uncertain future in both the academe and publicly-funded social services. Since the election of the Coalition Government in 2010 and the subsequent election of a Conservative Government in 2015, there has been an ideologically-informed assault on public services, underpinned by neoliberal policies, striking at the heart of many impoverished communities. Adopting the mantra *'we are all in this together'*, the Conservatives, as the dominant partner within the Coalition Government, began a radical programme of cuts to public services leading to an unprecedented period of austerity (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). This has resulted in ever-increasing and stark social inequalities evidenced by the appearance of food banks up and down the UK, and seen through the "Brexit" voting patterns, which highlighted further this divide between those 'with' and those 'without' and demonstrated that the gap was growing ever wider.

Against this social and political backdrop, the continued education and training for professional youth and community work has been especially difficult, given the marginal spaces occupied by both practitioners and academics. And yet despite this, they continue to exist, with evidence emerging of creative and innovative responses to the challenges faced, and a slight growth in the number of post-graduate courses being offered within the Higher Education Institutes. That said, this 'snapshot' of youth and community work education is taken against a context of significant change, and a great many 'unknowns' which are (briefly): changing student recruitment profiles by age, experience and socio-economic group; long established courses and highly respected universities making the decision to discontinue recruitment onto their youth and community work degrees; a decimated and almost non-existent part-time / work-based recruitment due to the afore-mentioned public sector funding cuts, and a

subsequent impact on staff accessing training, students accessing appropriate student placements and an overall diminishing in numbers of qualified supervisors.

But this is not the only story, and despite this period of uncertainty, austerity and increasing segregation and separation, new alliances have been made, in regards to youth and community work practice, as well as the education and training of youth and community workers. A closer relationship has been formed between the respective nations that make up the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and Europe. Likewise, the respective bodies that oversee the education and training of youth and community workers have developed more effective collaborations, both between the nations and with other bodies that represent the academic and professional communities.

Context, contradiction and challenges

In understanding the current context for youth and community work education and training, it is perhaps best to recognise the contradictory nature of the title. Whilst 'Youth Work' and 'Community Work' share common ground, and some level of shared history and traditions, there are distinctions, and frequently a professional worker, or educator, will tend towards a specific interpretation – 'youth work', 'community work', 'community action', 'community development' or 'community education', despite numerous developments that have attempted to counteract this, particularly in the applied, academic study of youth and community work within higher education courses.

The most recent attempt to bring these disciplines together more effectively was the Quality Assurance Agency Subject Benchmark Statement for Youth and Community Work, published originally in 2009 and reviewed in 2015 but not yet re-issued. This document, opened with an acknowledgement that:

> "*youth and community work ... is rooted in a range of overlapping traditions which have developed in the different contexts of local, regional and devolved national governments in the United Kingdom ... and that the term 'youth and community work' encompasses the different traditions in the four countries ... these traditions have not developed in isolation from one another and are not homogeneous in themselves. There is a history and*

current practice of mutual engagement, influence and contestation" (QAA, 2009: 5).

The Subject Benchmarks go on to recognise and define a set of overarching principles, acceptable to the nation constituents and disciplinary areas of study and practice. In summary these state that

> "*Youth and community work is a practice of informal and community education that involves the development of democratic and associational practices, which promote learning or development in the communities or individuals who choose to take part in the programmes that youth and community workers facilitate and support. ... Its pedagogic practice is based on the identification and responses to needs through dialogue and mutual aid and aspirations.*
>
> *... it is evident in the academic literatures on which the subject draws, concerning youth work, adult education, informal education, informal education, popular education, informal support, community development, and community capacity building.*" (QAA, 2009: p. 9)

It is this interplay between contested academic knowledge, practical experience and the wider social, political and historical context in which youth and community work is observed, as well as changing interpretations of 'youth', that creates the dynamic against which youth and community work policy has been shaped and developed. In particular, the shared emphasis on social justice, challenging inequality and recognising that youth and community work in all its guises is a pedagogic process that engages people through a recognised process of learning and development.

It is also true that in understanding youth and community work, it is necessary to make a distinction between the 'art' and 'craft' of practice and more recently the 'profession' of youth and community work. Such *habitus* (see Bourdieu, 1990) reflects the phases through which youth and community work has passed, thus far, from Socratic dialogue and it's place in developing moral philosophy (see Young (2006), in Banks, 2010) in the early attempts to define aspects of practice. Through 'conversations with purpose' that inform and extend the "practical, reasoning and rationale judgement by autonomous human beings – that is, people capable of acting in accordance with reason and from their own free will, voluntary as opposed to acting 'under compulsion or from ignorance'" (Aristotle, 1987: 66, in Banks, 2010: 98) as part of a more value-based delivery in the mid 19th Century, where education for the working classes was

minimal (Booton, 1985). Then onward, to Victorian philanthropic endeavours located in the social welfare traditions, the birth of the Settlement Movement and development of politically-motivated, faith-based and uniformed practices (Davies, 1999a) and more latterly it's recognition explicitly as an educational process, that reflects personal, social and political education (and more latterly spiritual education) and eventually acceptance as a profession (Davies, 1967; Davies, 1999b; Davies, 2008).

The emergence of a professional career in youth and community work, underpinned by a graduate level qualification or higher from September 2010, came at a price, as it coincided with attempts to diminish the role and status of many public sector professional roles, by the introduction of assistant grade posts – teaching assistants, health care assistants and youth support workers supporting teachers, nurses and youth workers respectively. This was an emerging concern in 2007, when noted academics Tony Jeffs and Jean Spence were predicting worrying trends for the sector, in an article notably entitled *Farewell to all that? The uncertain future of youth and community work education. Here* they suggested that "as the move to an 'all graduate' profession is instigated, generic youth and community work is paradoxically being repositioned as a sub-graduate, quasi-profession with much training located in the underfunded and employer led FE sector." (Jeffs and Spence, 2007, p. 157) Several years on, the challenge to achieve and retain professional status continues to be scrutinised, with the growth in the numbers of youth support worker roles and (correspondingly) diminishing employment opportunities for professionally qualified staff.

The issues outlined thus far have been central to many of the concerns voiced by academics and employers, alike, forming the basis for significant dialogue within the various Education and Training Standards committees within each of the national youth agencies, the bodies which validate and approve professional qualifications. It is against the backdrop of these challenges, and an ever increasing complexity of competing tensions, that courses have had to seek innovative and creative responses to recruitment and sustainability.

In recognising the challenges and competing pressures faced by Higher Education providers, it is perhaps best to view this from the students' perspective; observing their journey through the entire process from recruitment, progression through their current course of study and onwards into employment. This approach also highlights the various stakeholders involved: universities; university tutors; external agencies; workplace supervisors, and the students themselves.

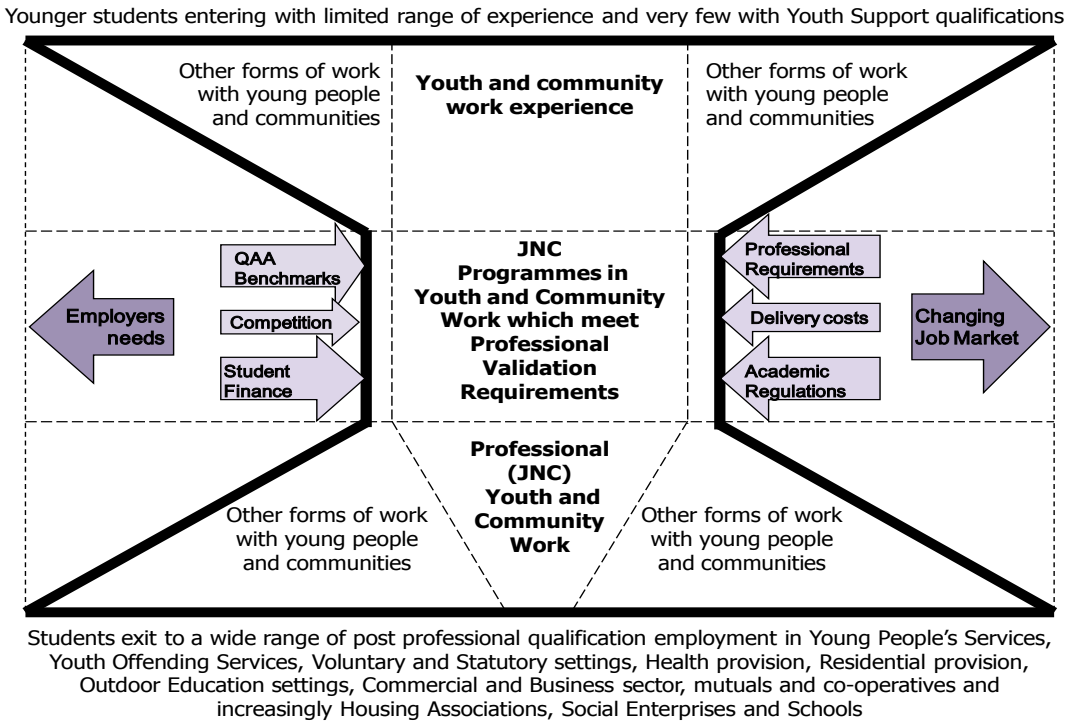

Figure 1: Competing pressures for Higher Education

All courses will expect a potential student to have some level of pre-course experience, but increasingly this is outside the traditional definitions of youth and community work. Typically, applicants may well have been supporting younger pupils within their schools, as mentors or peer educators, or through their involvement in the National Citizenship Service (NCS) - a Conservative Government initiative that encourages young people aged 16 and 17 years, to be involved in structured activities and a residential experience during the spring, summer or autumn (https://www.gov.uk/government/get-involved/take-part/national-citizen-service). Some have come via a post-16 health and social care vocational route where they have undertaken placements which enable them to evidence broad 'transferable skills'; whilst others may have a community sports or faith-based background.

Alongside the changing demographics of applicants, who on the whole are younger than previously and less experienced, their time at university will be influenced by a wide range of competing factors, most notably for all students in England is the level of debt incurred following the introduction of full-cost fees and student loans. This move to full-cost fees has also seen universities placing much greater emphasis on the delivery costs, and the impact of competition. As higher education has moved further into the 'marketplace', universities have had to engage with making consumer

choice more transparent, In order to do this, the Higher Education Standards Agency (HESA) require that all courses and institutions move towards publishing Key Information Sets (KIS) that allow direct comparison between different courses within an institution and between comparable courses in different institutions. This, together with student satisfaction surveys, form the basis for management (and future students') judging course quality and value and thus the 'performance' of staff.

As if consumer satisfaction wasn't enough, the published Key Information Set data requires the artificial calculation of student time spent in teaching, learning and assessment activities, broken down by year or stage of study. This arbitrary judgement that time equates to quality, or defines the product for 'consumption' shows a lack of understanding about the purpose of education, which should be measured by the learning 'gained', as in the outcomes / outputs, not the inputs. Taken further, the use of data sets to illustrate the quantity of time spent in any given activity, (not withstanding that it cannot accurately do this), fails to demonstrate the sense that their 'value-added' for the types of students entering youth and community work courses, many of whom have been central to the widening participation targets achieved within their university (Hoare and Johnstone, 2010; Reay et al, 2009). Both of these policy drivers have seen many Universities recruit diverse groups of youth and community work students, but this is now an issue of concern given the deferred debts incurred though the funding methodology.

Outside the immediate course and University structures, further tensions exist as the various Education and Training Standards bodies seek to respond to the changing job market, and ever increasing demands from employers for 'job-ready graduates'. These challenges have been recognised in both the professional body requirements for validation, and within the Quality Assurance Agency Subject Benchmarks. Beyond this, concerns also exist about the capacity of the youth and community work sector, as a whole, to support and supervise the necessary professional practice placements required. A significant number of employers have lost large numbers of experienced staff, and many lack the capacity to offer full-time or substantive placements, or provide appropriate levels of professional supervision. Whilst overall, the numbers of students have decreased over recent academic years; it was only in 2013 / 2014 that the impact of final year, graduate student placements, for those courses which waited until 2010 to implement the move to an all graduate profession. Given that all undergraduate youth and community work students are now required to undertake 3 substantive periods of assessed practice over their 3 years of study, placing a

significant demand on the best placement agencies, often in direct competition to social work placements, which have the luxury of being able to pay their placement providers.

Differences across the Nations

Despite some common features across the 5 nations, and a joint commitment to the Subject Benchmarks, all 5 nations have specific requirements for their professionally validated courses. At present, the national agencies in England (http://www.nya.org.uk) and Wales (http://www.etswales.org.uk/home.php) have direct links to the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) , the employers and staff side of which negotiate and agree the terms and conditions of employment for youth and community workers. In Scotland (http://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/), through a process of mutual recognition, this process is replicated, whilst N. Ireland (http://www.ycni.org/), whilst recognising the JNC, works together with partners in the Republic of Ireland to form the North-South Education and Training Standards (NSETS) Committee (http://www.ycni.org/nsets/NSETS.html). All of the national bodies then come together to form the Joint Education and Training Standards (JETS) committee, who collectively have oversight of the national validation processes and policy drivers.

In all 5 nations, there has been recognition that youth and community work is a graduate profession, but in Scotland this entails 4 years of study to achieve an honours degree, whilst everywhere else this is achieved in 3 years. There are also emerging policy differences, as Wales seeks to include youth workers on their register of education professionals, and Scotland has established an equivalent registration process, which includes a commitment to undertake continuing professional development. Elsewhere, the Republic of Ireland, has much closer links to Europe, and has been looking to the Council for Europe's Competence Framework for Youth Work.

Creative Reponses

Against this backdrop of challenging circumstances and worrying messages, in particular for the English universities, a number of possible opportunities have emerged. This is being fostered through closer alliances between the academic community, represented by the Training Agencies Group, the Professional Association for Lecturers in Youth and Community Work (http://www.tagpalycw.org/), staff from the National Youth Agency, and members of the Education and Training Standards committee, who are already discussing ways to utilise the new policy and funding context in support of youth and community work education. Such examples are based on opportunities contained within the funding models, making use of changes to deferred loan repayment criteria and also the freedom of a less regulated market, with greater institutional control of degree and post-graduate course structures, freed from the previous funding assumptions about student engagement.

With part-time study now fundable through Student Finance England, up to a maximum of £6,750 per annum for university courses, it is possible to promote higher education more easily to part-time employees, through partnerships with employer consortia who may seek to develop local access to provision, delivered in situ, with students accessing Tuition Fee Loans to cover the cost of study. (Bennion at al, 2011) At Leeds Beckett University, a national pilot has been developed for a 1 day per week delivery, over a 44 week year, where students attend a local delivery site (based in an employer's premises) and the university makes a significant financial contribution for the use of teaching space, ICT provision and other resources. The money paid for the use of these facilities is then re-invested to support student bursaries for travel, books and childcare. In this example, the university is working closely with the staff training and development team, who have provided local access to pre-degree level training, thus supporting non-traditional learners make the transition to university.

Another university, Newman University Birmingham has developed an accelerated degree, based on 2 years study full time, for people with ongoing practice and significant prior experience, and a 3 year, part-time degree route. The has been achieved as a result of the removal of the core funding grant from HEFCE which was predicated on the number of students undertaking 120 credits in an academic year, as it means that students can 'purchase' credit in any combination of units, as both the market and their availability allows. The link with employers in developing this model has reduced pressure on finding placements as employers can collaborate on this, and the reduction in overall qualification timescales makes employer support more likely. Meanwhile Sheffield Hallam University, working with a voluntary sector

organisation, have taken over a Community centre and deliver a programme of youth and community work there, providing genuine placement opportunities for students and adding capacity to the sector as a whole.

Unless Government and universities actively promote the benefits of graduate study funded through deferred loans, or universities increase access opportunities and flexibility of delivery; future generations of youth and community work graduates may well have little understanding of the communities and contexts in which they will work as they increasingly distance those from lower socio-economic groups from the opportunities offered by higher education. Despite evidence to the contrary (Chowdry et al, 2012) it is highly likely that non traditional students, from families and communities with limited history of engagement in higher education will continue to fear future debt. The impact of this may prompt a return to the philanthropic traditions that formed the basis of Victorian youth and community work, where those 'with' do good to those 'who have not'; something which is at odds with the needs of communities that saw a backlash to austerity politics, bankers and politicians greed, and wholesale consumerism during the summer riots of 2011, and perhaps underpinned the recent voting patterns during the EU Referendum, within working class communities.

Concluding Thoughts

Whilst these are challenging times for higher education, the impact of austerity goes much further and tears deep into the heart of already impoverished communities and those who work to support them. Against this backdrop, the need for professionally qualified youth and community work, informed by critically reflective practitioners, has never been more urgent, which makes it imperative that new and creative ways of engaging future students can be found. The creation of locally based consortia, employers from the statutory and voluntary sector working with further and higher education, need to work together to provide evidence of the impact that youth and community work can make to people's lives; provide access to locally based initial training and qualifications, as well as graduate qualifications; develop sector capacity and support, and offer access to continuing professional development opportunities.

It is perhaps these very communities, who feel most removed from the opportunities afforded in thriving cities, that generated the groundswell of nationalism and euro-scepticism, in England at least, which now sees the United Kingdom approaching

‘Brexit’ and a further set of challenges that must be faced. This is perhaps at odds with the majority of youth and community work providers, who have been building ever closer links with colleagues across Europe, as we seek to develop new and innovative approaches to the challenges faced through racism and xenophobia, austerity, migration, mobility and employment within the global economy.

(Words: 3,191 *not including sub-headings*)

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